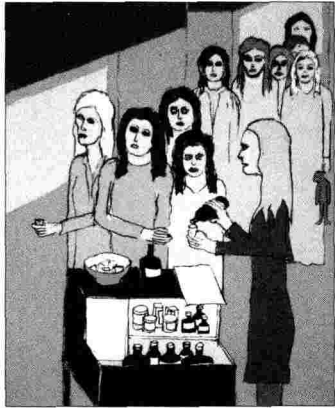


I want to break free

Creative expression or nothing more than art therapy? **Helen Sumpter** assesses three controversial shows of work by prisoners, patients and troubled teens

It's now familiar practice for major institutions to exhibit creativity produced outside the mainstream art world. Barbican and Tate Britain have both shown portions of Jeremy Deller and Alan Kane's Folk Art Archive (featuring scarecrows, tea cosies and images of gurning competitions), and last year the Whitechapel's exhibition 'Inner Worlds Outside' displayed work by the better known of the untrained, so-called naive artists; psychiatric patients and eccentric visionaries among them. By showing the outsiders alongside modern masters such as Miró, Kandinsky and Klee, the Whitechapel was affording them equal status as artists and in doing so, challenging and broadening the criteria against which we judge and value visual art. Three exhibitions currently on in London are aiming to do the same, by emphasising that creativity with a therapeutic function for the artist can have an equally favourable effect on the viewer.

The ICA's 'Insider Art' exhibition includes 200 works selected from over



'Tablet Time' by ex-patient David Beales

3,000 submissions for this year's annual Koestler Awards Scheme – open to prisoners and inmates of other secure institutions such as psychiatric hospitals, young offenders units and immigration removal centres. Among the pieces chosen by a panel including artist Grayson Perry and the ICA's director of exhibitions Mark Sladen is a life-size Dalek version of the Madonna and Child (complete with the once virginal popstar namesake's famous conical bra) and a rather stylish handbag crafted from Golden Virginia tobacco pouches. There are also paintings, sculptures, portraits, textiles and ceramics with subjects ranging from boats, Bratz and bikers to 'Gulliver's Travels', in addition to the more obvious

depictions of prison life. 'Contemporary art has become a phenomenon in Britain and is now associated with money, glamour and hype', explains Mark Sladen. 'But being involved in organising the Folk Art Archive at the Barbican got me thinking about the importance of non-professional art making. The Archive is fascinating because it reveals the variety of reasons behind why people make art and how good it can be. Art is much broader than the contemporary art world and it's part of the ICA's function to be looking outside of the mainstream.'

Sladen emphasises that the work on display is as much about artistic merit as self-worth for the inmate-artists and while some work obviously shows talent, to be asked to judge it on the same basis as that of a trained artist can be problematic, if only because that talent is understandably unformed. This is particularly evident in the medium of paint, so it's the sculptures and objects that create most impact. A sleeping figure under a blanket in brown papier-mâché is particularly arresting and many of the ceramics would hold their own in any contemporary craft show. Intricately carved soap and matchstick galleons have to be admired for their skill and as art forms that perhaps only exist behind bars.

'Redefining Bedlam' brings together work by 30 artists and users of the mental health services connected to the Bethlem Gallery (celebrating its tenth anniversary) and Archives based at Bethlem Royal Hospital. More directly expressive about the artists' experiences, the exhibition at Novas's impressive Contemporary Urban Centre in London Bridge has a stronger pull. 'Our art initiatives are about the power of communication by people whose stories are not normally heard', says Novas Group's chief executive Maria Donoghue-Mills of their work with various disadvantaged groups. 'This exhibition gives people a voice that others can relate to and allows people to think about life from a different perspective. At the same time we don't want the work to be patronised because it's still great art.' It's also worth noting that many famous artists have experienced mental health problems. Louis Wain, whose cat illustrations still sell on greetings cards and Richard Dadd, whose work hangs in Tate Britain, were both patients at Bedlam.

Another organisation marking its tenth anniversary is Kids Company, the charity set up by Camilla Batmanghelidjh to support children with behavioural and emotional problems resulting from trauma and neglect. Their show, 'Demons and Angels' (in partnership with Tate), in the catacomb-like basement of Shoreditch Town Hall, includes installations, junk sculptures, mobiles, video and text by kids who have been on the receiving end of all manner of ills. The resulting works – in turns harrowing and uplifting – have a raw energy and inventiveness

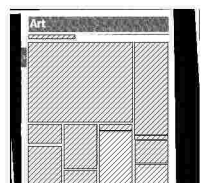
that can move the emotions as much as a Turner or a Pollock.

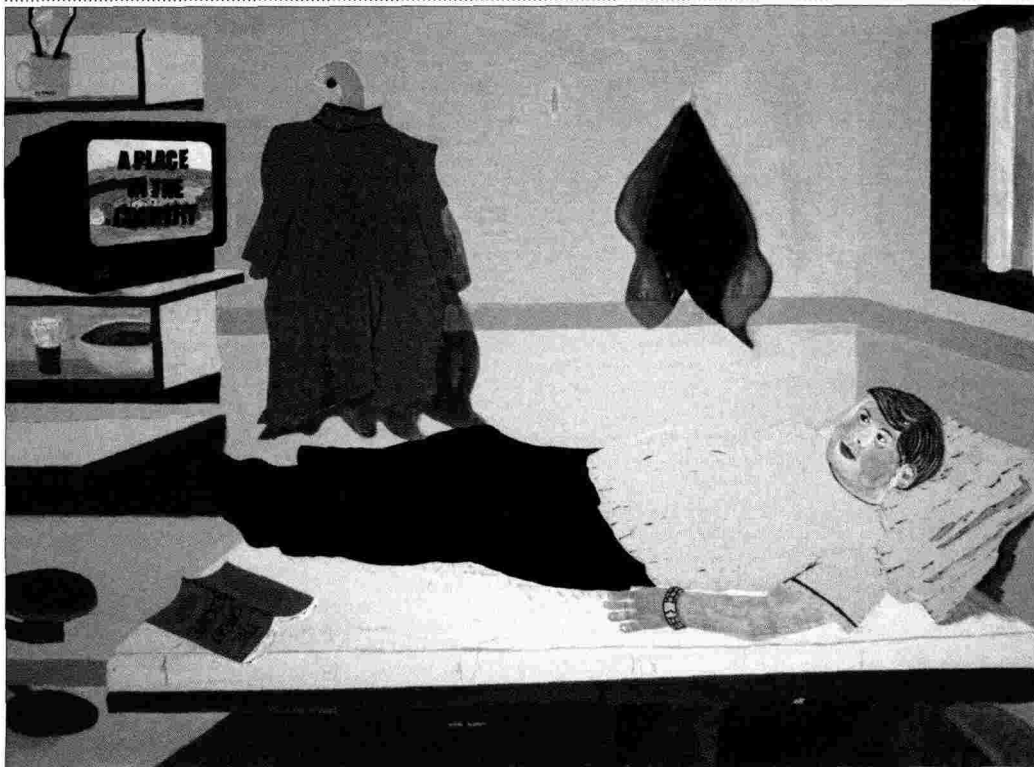
'It's about the power of communication by people whose stories are not normally heard'

While none of the objects or pictures in these shows is likely to sell for millions, they remind us that art has a function beyond commerce. Howard Patience, one of the artists included in 'Insider Art', who is now receiving commissions for his work and thinking of further study in art and design, sums up how cathartic and healing the process can be: 'Art is not only a release, it's an inspiration for those who make it and see it.'

'Insider Art' is showing at the ICA until Sept 9. 'Redefining Bedlam' is showing at Novas Contemporary Urban Centre until Aug 18. 'Demons and Angels' is showing at Shoreditch Town Hall until Aug 30. See listings for details.

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Doing porridge An anonymous group painting, 'Prison Life', by inmates at HMP Parc in South Wales